

February 25, 1966

Honorable George P. Miller
House of Representatives
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Miller:

It was a pleasure and a privilege to be able to meet you a few weeks ago at the Ames Laboratories dedication, and I would look forward to any chance to continue the discussion. Unfortunately I am no traveller and have too much to do here to compete with you for commuter space on the transcontinental jets.

I am not writing to remind you of the general unhappiness that the restrictions on funds for space science must impel on anyone who has some concern for our future in this direction. In fact, for a time I felt that there might be some benefit from the more conservative course that our planetary exploration program was being obliged to take, since I had some question whether we might be planning a Mars lander mission for the earliest possible opportunity before we had built an adequate scientific and technological base for it. I say this while I have been one of the earliest and most vehement enthusiasts for planetary exploration. I do not favor landing on Mars until we have subjected it to very rigorous remote reconnaissance so that the details of our landing program, including sterilization, can be based on a somewhat more definite range of scientific information than would otherwise be possible.

The recent redirections of the planetary program now appear to be going so far in the other direction as to pose even more serious hazards for this long term concern. Namely, considerable effort is being diverted for the planetary flybys in 1967 and 1969, thereby demolishing the opportunity of a comprehensive orbital reconnaissance in time for its data to be importantly consequential for the following Voyager program. What I fear may then be the end result is not merely the exasperating delay in our whole program of planetary exploration, but also the in-temperate jumping to the commitment for a full scale lander without having had the necessary interval of access to orbital data. I am well aware of the budgetary exigencies that make any choice a difficult one at the present time, but I also know that these views have been proposed most vehemently by the various advisory committees charged with consideration of exobiological research. I hope there is still time to give them the consideration they deserve.

You may ask why I write to you instead of the line of authority in NASA. In fact, there is considerable scientific sympathy for these ambitions for an early orbiter to Mars, at a cost not seriously out of line with present programs. However, there is an understandable touchiness about pushing much further than Congressional interest would encourage, especially in the current atmosphere of budgetary stress.

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Page 2

I am sure you have seen this editorial in the New York Times. Let me say I do not associate myself with any negative and unconstructive demands to tear down the Apollo program. However, many of my fellow scientists came to this conclusion out of their exasperation at the gross imbalance in our effort in space. And I am afraid I do share this exasperation enough to feel impelled to pass it on to you.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics